

Developing a Moral Education Curriculum

Ed Schwartz

It has been 21 years since the Talmud Torah of St. Paul launched the moral development curriculum project that culminated in 1983 with the publication of *Moral Education: A Practical Guide for Jewish Teachers* (published by Alternatives in Religious Education). Since that time, the Talmud Torah has continued to build on the findings and curricular materials that issued from that original project. This effort is now on the threshold of its second generation, as the children of students who first heard the dilemma stories which eventually were included in *Moral Education* are, in increasing numbers, occupying the seats where their parents once sat.

Reflections on such a long-running commitment to the ongoing development and consistent implementation of a substantive moral education curriculum may be of interest to educators concerned about the present state of moral education in Jewish settings. In an article which will appear in an upcoming issue of the journal *Religious Education*, the development of the Talmud Torah of St. Paul's approach to moral education is outlined, and some of the more difficult pedagogical issues faced along the way are discussed. In the present article, that outline is summarized and three fundamental issues that must be considered along with more specific methodological concerns are presented

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CURRICULA

Moral Education: A Practical Guide for Jewish Teachers is based on a cognitive-developmental model of moral education. The body of the book is a series of dilemma-centered units with accompanying Jewish sources. The Talmud Torah faculty's very positive experience testing and revising *Moral Education* led to the inclusion of structured moral dilemma discussions in both the day and afternoon schools' curricula. Both schools continue to reflect this influence, though in recent years the more significant development in this area has been in the day school

MORAL EDUCATION IN THE TALMUD TORAH DAY SCHOOL

The day school initially incorporated moral dilemmas into the curriculum by dedicating several class periods a week to dilemma discussions. These discussions were intended, at least in part, to complement the Tanakh curriculum. In time, this approach was replaced by direct integration of pertinent dilemmas into the regular Tanakh, rabbinics, language arts and social studies curricula, in conjunction with structured exploration of dilemmas extrapolated from each discipline's primary curriculum materials.

From 1985 through 1998 the dilemma discussion dimension of the day school's curriculum was extended in three directions. The first of these extensions brought day school students into contact with students at a school in a small town located approximately fifty miles north of St. Paul. This effort centered on the exchange of video-taped dilemma discussions that had taken place in the corresponding school. The students receiving a tape first discussed the dilemma on their own, then viewed and critiqued the discussion of the same dilemma

on the tape. The primary objectives of the exchange were to widen and enrich the range of moral perspectives available to the students, and to employ moral problem-solving as a concrete basis for intercultural learning.

The exchange received an enthusiastic response from both parents and children at the Talmud Torah. The day school faculty was, therefore, quite surprised when, after a year and a half of contact, the staff of the corresponding school indicated that they would not be continuing the exchange. In subsequent discussions of how the program might have been improved and sustained, it was surmised that staff members of the school in the small town had not felt themselves to have been full partners in the effort. In addition, a third party noted that the cultural intensity of the Talmud Torah had made the corresponding staff very uncomfortable, especially during visits to the day school.

The dilemma exchange program, despite the impression that it had ended prematurely, generated significant momentum at the Talmud Torah toward continued expansion of moral education learning opportunities. In the fall of 1991, the day school's next major initiative was begun with the establishment of the Talmud Torah Vaad Din (Justice Committee). The Vaad Din was charged with responsibility for adjudicating disputes and establishing policies in a wide variety of school settings. In the eight years since it was founded, it has exerted a significant influence on both the ethos and practical operation of the school. In the process, it has provided the students who have served on it with an opportunity to apply their judgment in the service of the school community, while presenting those who bring cases to it with examples of students thoughtfully exercising real authority. It has also led to an enriched rabbinics curriculum through the coordination of the study of halakhic texts on Jewish legal procedure with corresponding American legal materials, both of which then serve as sources for precedents to be used in Vaad Din decisions. Since its inception, it has heard over 80 cases dealing with issues such as ownership of group projects, lost and stolen property, use of playground space and equipment, and lunchroom decorum.

In 1995, the Vaad Din program spun-off the Intercommunal Moral and Legal Education Project. This effort, loosely modeled after the Talmud Torah's earlier dilemma discussion exchange program, brought together Justice Committee members from local Jewish, Catholic, and public schools for discussion and joint programs. Among these programs were presentations by persons involved professionally in the resolution of disputes, including the Attorney General of the State of Minnesota and the Senior Kadi of the State of Israel. As was the case with the earlier exchange, the Intercommunal Moral and Legal Education Project was intended to bring students into contact with students of diverse backgrounds on the basis of a common interest in moral problem solving.

THREE IMPORTANT ISSUES

In the past twenty years, moral education at the Talmud Torah Day School has moved from classroom discussion of hypothetical dilemmas to the integration of dilemma discussion with other strands of the curriculum. In recent years the day school has worked to extend opportunities for moral problemsolving beyond the confines of class discussion, into the everyday life of the school and the larger world

Twenty years of continuous growth in a cognitive developmental moral education program is in itself a developmental process of sorts. Over the course of its development, the program has met with many challenges, including the following three issues, which are of fundamental significance in building a moral

education curriculum.

1. Moral education is a developmental process, and development takes time.

Development takes time. This is true of human development, and also true of curriculum development. The day school's moral education program has developed through patient building on an ever-broadening base of experience. One might consider, by way of contrast, how many approaches and curricula for Hebrew language instruction have come and gone in the past twenty years in most Jewish schools. In this age of restless shifting of curriculum goals and materials, twenty years of stability is a long time.

Along with this methodological stability, the Talmud Torah has also enjoyed a stability of teaching staff, administration, and educational vision. The day school has had three principals since its inception in 1982. All three have come from among the teachers and administrators of the Talmud Torah. It is important to distinguish between stability and stultifying inertia. Nevertheless, given the enormous pedagogical and professional instability in contemporary Jewish education, steady, long-term curricular development in a given institution is relatively rare.

The initial challenge in this regard was to construct an institutional context in which it was possible to envision educational objectives which, through careful planning and persistent effort, allowed for continuous development, without sacrificing the capacity for critical self-evaluation and restructuring. This depth development of a moral educational curriculum takes time, and the patience and stamina to see it through.

This is, however, the age of the quick fix. Educational trends and fashions throughout the twentieth century bear eloquent witness to the fact that, whatever their inherent validity, the most popular (and short-lived) among them have promised quick and clear results. Lawrence Kohlberg's own research in the area of moral education was eventually discounted in many quarters for its inability to deliver on premature claims of greatly accelerated moral development.

The facts move at a more pedestrian pace, whether one is speaking of the challenge of developing moral judgment, or the challenge of developing curricula that encourage the development of moral judgment. In either case, as Rabbi Akiva learned, it is the constant drip of water that, over time, pierces stone.¹

2. Our own investment in the status quo

Moral education, as distinct from socialization, must reach beyond the inculcation of a given society's mores to the broader objective of developing rational moral judgment. Though the elementary objectives of a developmental curriculum may run parallel to the inculcation of conventional social expectations, post-conventional moral judgment is characterized by the ability to stand apart from such conventions and to weigh their causes and effects against rational principles of justice and equity. Moral education helps the maturing thinker to invert the premise "This is the right thing to do because everyone does it" into the question "Would the world be better if everyone did it?"

It was for advocating this transition from education as socialization to education as learning to think critically that Socrates was indicted by his fellow Athenians, inasmuch as his critics equated the development of rational moral judgment with corruption of the young. Twenty-five hundred years later, much the same charge has been leveled against twentieth-century advocates of a cognitive developmental approach to moral education.

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So, for example, former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett once warned that American high school students “engage in ‘cognitive moral development’ where they learn to question all forms of authority, particularly that of the family....”² Secretary Bennett’s concern was, of course, not educational, but political, as were Socrates’ accusers’ charges. But such charges do at least clarify the reality that communities that are serious about developing the moral judgment of their members must be prepared to change, individually and collectively, in response to that judgment.

However, a heavy investment in the status quo will tend to encourage resistance to change in one’s own moral perspective and to facilitating such changes in others. A few short generations ago, the vast majority of Jews around the world had little stake in the ways of the world, as they were then constituted. With little invested in the power structures that subordinated them, our educational predecessors had little to fear in acknowledging that justice required radical changes in those structures. Even those who eschewed secular solutions to problems had no difficulty in recognizing that “the powers that be” were the powers that oppressed them, and that those who prospered in such a world did so at the expense of others. For those dealt the poorest hand in life, it is often easier to see, as Plato put it, that “the good transcends what is.”

The rapid movement of a high proportion of Jews around the world from the ranks of the socially denied to the status of social beneficiaries has meant that some things that were obvious to our predecessors may no longer be so obvious to us. Moral education from a position of privilege is an exceedingly tricky matter, for social comfort may well conflict with moral acuity. A deep commitment to moral development requires a concomitant commitment to a critical understanding of assumptions born of privilege, assumptions that weaken the moral grasp of teacher and student alike. Moral education that pulls its punches will ultimately shorten its reach. Assumptions may have to do with prestige, authority, property, social class, or many other topics. A strong moral education curriculum must make ample room for a critical consideration of self-serving assumptions in such areas.

3. A religious understanding of development

Classical formulations of human development imply a meaning and order to human life--meaning and order that open a path toward competence. To adhere to a developmental model of education is to affirm that our educational efforts are prospered by a will that human beings grow in awareness and ability. In other words, the developmental model is, in essence, a model of providence. We should not be surprised that, over the ages, Jewish thinkers have embraced this notion of development as an expression of providence. Eric Auerbach, in his essay “Odyssey’s Scar”³ identifies the developmental dimension of the Hebrew Bible’s biographies as one of its distinguishing characteristics.

Mishnaic, medieval and modern Jewish taxonomies of human development abound. These taxonomies, with one common but significant difference, are often strikingly similar to their modern scientific counterparts.⁴ This exception is that whereas the scientific model tacitly posits a mysterious vector which is inherent in the person and which provides the impetus for development, Jewish taxonomies typically locate this force in the drawing out (the literal meaning of the Latin *educere*, from which the word “education” is derived) of the individual’s potential. This force is less a natural drive that pushes the person forward than a Divine gravity that draws the person onward

A developmental view of moral learning places the educator in the position of midwife to this providential process. This means that we must not isolate moral development from the development of the whole person. On the contrary, moral learning must be an integral part of every aspect of a school's curriculum and consistently linked to the students' expanding awareness of their own maturation. Only in this way will students grasp that moral development is a religious imperative, rooted in a teacher and school's fundamental vision of life's purposes and possibilities. Only from such a perspective can students come to see mitzvot *bein adam l'havero* and *mitzvot bein adam l'makom* as functioning in a mutually supportive manner, and their own development as an expression of Divine care.

WORK OF MORAL EDUCATORS

Moral educators must continually work to maintain their patience, perspective, and faith--patience with the process, a critical perspective on lurking presumptions, and faith in that Will which the developmental model traces. Along with the acquisition of a full array of pedagogical tools, educators must also work to extend moral learning beyond the confines of classroom-bound hypotheticals and into the larger world. All of these efforts, (along with community service projects and other mitzvot bein adam l'havero-based activities) are critical factors in the construction of an enduring, substantive moral education curriculum. Among the many responsibilities facing Jewish educators there is no more pressing need and no higher calling.

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Footnotes

1. *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, chapter 6, version A.
2. Quoted in "A Nation Still at Risk", *Newsweek*, May 2, 1998
3. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1953, pp 3-23
4. See "Encouraging Moral Development," in *The New Jewish Teachers Handbook*, Alternatives in Jewish Education, Denver, 1994 for examples.

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